

## THE 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, 2022

SERMON BY BISHOP JASON ZINKO,  
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### JOHN 20:19-31

*<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." <sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Christ is risen! Hallelujah!

Last week was the most important Sunday in the church year. It was when we heard the impossible and hopeful message that Jesus was raised from the dead to give new life. God's greatest gift for us was realized and celebrated again, filling us with faith and joy.

For many of us, last week was even more special because it was the first in-person Easter Sunday since 2019. It was a time to sing together and to see familiar faces,

even if they were masked. I hope that your experience of Holy Week and Easter helped to fill you spiritually.

This week, we turn to the familiar story of 'Doubting Thomas.'

In this story we hear about locked doors, doubt and faith, peace and forgiveness. For those who have heard this story before, you have likely heard sermons that focus on any one of these topics. But would it surprise you that none of these are really at the heart of this reading? Neither is Thomas or the disciples. I don't even think that Jesus is the central figure in the reading.

At the heart of this story is the Holy Spirit.

If you remember back to when Jesus was saying goodbye to his disciples before the last supper, he promised to send them another Advocate – the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised them that the Spirit would walk beside them, guide them, teach them, comfort them, help them, and intercede for them. Jesus said that they would have the ongoing presence of God with them through all things.

It sounds like an incredible promise. The trouble is that the disciples don't seem to have really believed that promise. With Jesus gone, they acted as though everything had come crashing down and that the thing God had been doing through Jesus was over.

Jesus knows that they need something else beyond just a word. So Jesus walks into a locked room, offering peace in the middle of fear. He breathed into them the Holy Spirit. So now, not only is the Spirit with them, but is now literally a part of who they are. Jesus shows them that not only does the empty tomb mean life, but that the ongoing presence of God in them is the promise of new life that comes from a risen Christ.

This is new creation again. Like God first breathed into Adam and Eve to give them life at creation, Jesus breathes into the disciples to show them that sin is destroyed and they have life again. And Jesus breathes that same Spirit into us now. That is the Easter message. It's not only that Jesus didn't stay dead, but that Jesus gives us new life through the Spirit. The Spirit is the continuation of what Jesus had done during his ministry.

So what does this mean for us and for the church today?

Well, you may have noticed that the last two years have been a bit different. All around us we have seen delayed grief, job loss and financial strain, increase in abuse and addiction, mental health problems, and relationship breakdowns.

In the church we have seen disconnection, grief, conflict, financial strain, and burnout of lay and rostered leaders. We have had to adapt and change plans several times over, and have had to cancel more things than we can count. We worry about if people will ever come back. We want nothing more than a return to what things used to be.

I would say that, in many ways, we feel like the church of two-and-a-half years ago died and now we are a smaller group sitting behind closed doors wondering how we can fix this. In reality, I think we have been grieving the death of the church of fifty years ago, and the pandemic just wouldn't let us pretend it was still alive anymore.

The reason I say that is because of the emails, phone calls, and discussions I have on a regular basis. The pressures and concerns that people bring up about the pandemic are identical to those brought up before there ever was a pandemic. The shrinking, or aging, or 'decline' of our church has been happening for decades.

Many congregations seem to think that this is a financial problem. Or a 'recruitment' problem. Or a program problem. Or a sports and shopping on Sunday problem.

I think it's actually a faith problem. Or, to be more accurate, a discipleship problem.

Do we actually believe that Jesus breathes the Spirit into us, asking to work on being disciples ourselves and then going into the world to talk about the faith and life we have in Christ? Or do we prefer to sit in our locked rooms commiserating about what used to be? If nothing else, I hope that the story of Thomas shows us that Jesus' plan is not for us to sit in a locked room by ourselves.

If we are unable to talk openly and clearly about the life Christ has called us to, then we will never be able to share that message with friends, family, neighbours, and others that we meet each day. We will be less likely to believe the promise of new

life that Jesus gives us. And we will be unable to share with others why our faith is meaningful to us. A life of discipleship calls us to our own spiritual growth, but also to sharing that faith.

Jesus says, “as the Father sent me, so I send you.” In the new life of resurrection and with the power of the Spirit, Jesus sends his followers out to continue the mission and ministry that God sent Jesus to start. The Spirit gives us the ability to carry on that work. The Spirit sends each one of us out to minister in Christ’s name to our communities, our neighbours, our friends and family, and to complete strangers.

And when we gather together as believers, we become the church. That’s right – the building isn’t the church; the community in the building is the church. The way in which we as a congregation grow and share our faith is how we see the Spirit at work in the congregation. It’s how we see the Spirit working through us.

In fact, we aren’t able to continue Jesus’ ministry until we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Without God’s Spirit leading and guiding, we don’t actually know which way to go. But in our baptisms, God sends us the Spirit that we need to do that ministry. God breathes the Spirit into us. With that Spirit, we know how to grow in faith, how to reach out into the world, how to care for what God has made, and how to trust in God and the new life that we have been given.

The problem for us – the thing that we don’t really like about the Spirit – is that it’s unpredictable.

Throughout the bible we have story after story of people who pick up and leave what they know in order to follow the Spirit. The disciples were flung to all corners of the known world in order to share their faith in a Saviour who was raised from the dead.

I think we have a harder time embracing the impulsiveness of the Spirit than the first disciples. We like things to be planned out, risk-free, and comfortable. We want a guarantee that what we try will work. But that’s not how the Spirit operates. The Spirit guides us in ways that we would never expect. The Spirit nudges us in directions that we would never go. The Spirit causes us to upset the status quo when we hear God telling us that the status quo just isn’t good enough anymore. The Spirit leads us to take risks and to do things that we can only do when we rely on God alone.

But the Spirit also helps us to see the new life God gives us, and to live out that life trusting that God is leading the way.

Living a resurrected life changes how we think about what God is doing. Living a new life guided by the Spirit helps us to listen for God's voice and follow where it leads, no matter where that might be. Living that new life calls us into a deeper relationship with God, and asks us to go a step further than we thought we could. This will be especially important as we look to what the church will be like after the pandemic. I don't know what that will be, but I know it won't be the same as what was. It can't be. It will need to be different and we need to allow the Spirit to guide us.

To begin with, we need to unlock the doors and stop hiding in familiar spaces hoping the rest of the world won't bother us. If we take resurrection seriously, then we need to boldly and faithfully walk into the world knowing that God is waiting for us, working with us, and blessing us as we minister to all of God's creation. And we need to trust in the promise that God has already brought us into a new life.

Blessing to you all as we continue to grow in our discipleship of Christ – the one who calls us, redeems us, and leads us each day. Blessings to you as you grow into your trust of the Holy Spirit. And blessings to you as you live out the new life that we have in Jesus.

**Amen.**